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JEFFERSON REPORT: PROBING EDUCATION

Amazing Ancient Universities – Then and Now

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First in a Series

We can learn much by examining impressive ancient universities that still exist today. They have shaped our world and have a lot to say about education methods for now, what citizenship can be, what government is for, and what life is really like.

In a new Jefferson Publications series, I will look at some of the major oldest universities from Africa, Europe, and the United States that are still going strong. I will probe their theories of education with a view to improving those we have today. I will pick two or more prominent people from each university to use as examples.

“Oh, to be a polymath” will apply to all the famous affiliates. My first point is that **creating polymaths** has been the overarching scheme of education in the past, but this is truncated today by turning many institutions into specialist trade schools. A polymath, by definition, is an individual whose knowledge “spans a substantial number of subjects, known to draw on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems.”

On the collegiate level we need to return to a broad education without sacrificing majors. The second point is that we need to return to **education for**

citizenship, not just to make money or prestige for oneself. The third point discusses our **governments regarding educational freedoms and national purposes**.

West (<i>approximate founding</i>)	Famous Teachers or Students
Fez, Morocco – 859	Fatima al-Fihri (b 800), Ibn Khaldun (b 1332)
Bologna, Italy – 1088	Dante (b 1265), Laura Bassi (b 1711)
Paris, France – 1150	Thomas Aquinas (b 1225), Simone Veil (b 1909)
Oxford, England – 1208	Roger Bacon (b 1210), Isaiah Berlin, (b 1909)
Salamanca, Spain – 1218	Cervantes (b 1547), Ángela Abós Ballarín (b 1934)
America's three oldest	
Harvard – 1636	John Adams (b 1735), Benazir Bhutto, (b 1953)
William & Mary – 1693	Thomas Jefferson (b 1743), and several from the House of Representatives: Dina Titus (b 1950), Michele Bachmann (b 1956), Jennifer Wexton (b 1968), Stephanie Murphy (b 1978)
St John's – 1696	Ahmet Ertegun (b 1923), Ben Sasse (b 1972)

There were many venerable and interesting institutions in Africa, India, China, and other parts of the world founded early on. That is for another project.

The major question: What can we learn from ongoing ancient and contemporary colleges and graduates and teachers for our current teaching and learning? **Answer:** getting back to ancient ways of teaching and learning with integrative education for knowledge, citizenship, and the understanding of life. This will improve everyone by making us more knowledgeable about our world and who we are or are striving to be.

Introduction

The ancient universities that are still flourishing today from Europe and America can teach us a great deal. Notable people have been educated there with many astounding results and discoveries due in part to their education. Also, there were teaching techniques and results that challenge our current obsession with “majors” and preparing people for the current job market. That was not the case then, but it has taken over college teaching now.

My major concern should be stated at once. I am deeply worried about how colleges and universities have lost their original purposes – **to give a broad education and make useful citizens of its students as well as providing research into life concerns**. That is what virtually all institutes of

education had as their implied or stated mission. That has been largely lost to specialization and job training. It should be reversed, and I intend to show that the major universities in the past pursued “the better” versions of education. The exceptions were those colleges that trained clergy exclusively, but over time opened to other spheres of knowledge. Most ancient universities, including the American ones, were caught in that function, but soon expanded. But early divinity students were expected to know more than religion and were trained for civic leadership. Roger Bacon paved that street. Science, history, languages, philosophy, literature, etc. were thrust upon future clerics, much to their later advantage.

I will examine some of these universities by attributed age. Always a debatable topic, the age of a college doesn't count toward its current standing that should be based on results, not age. But it gives an interesting method to choose. Is it significant that the ancient universities are still functioning at the top of the heap? I would not want to rank on merit alone – that would be endlessly difficult and debatable. But then, whatever results I come up with, that will be debatable too. As it should be.

I will also use examples of famous teachers or alumni who show in the lives and work a proof that general learning has its advantages. Generally, I will give examples from the early and later days of the selected colleges, with an equal showing of male and female. The exception to this rule is Fez in Morocco because the ancients are so interesting. And though there are many interesting women from St John's, I couldn't resist looking at an extremely well-educated but renegade evangelical senator who is now president of a large university with great ideas and a Turk with an interest in medieval philosophy who was instrumental in writing and producing rock 'n' roll. What a combination! And I use a bevy of women legislators who have wide-ranging opinions from the College of William and Mary.

Clearly, many of my examples' thoughts and actions occurred after college, and it is always difficult to assign times and places to the origin of anyone's ideas. Some were at multiple colleges. Suffice it to say that colleges have influence but it is hard to establish the precise origin of anyone's ideas. Indeed, there may be wide differences between individuals from the taught curriculum. I use their examples to make a point about education in general, not to prove historical connections.

Here is where Ibn Khaldun is an example. He was a 14th century Islamic writer. Among insights he had was one based on the history of his native North Africa. Was there a rhythm to the rise and fall of dynasties? Desert tribesmen, he argued, always have more courage and social cohesion than settled, civilized folk, so occasionally, they will sweep in and conquer lands whose rulers have become corrupt and complacent. They create a new dynasty – and, over time,

become corrupt and complacent themselves, ready to be overrun by a new set of barbarians.”[1] Is this happening in our time?

Method – The major point in these articles is that we have a lot to learn from our ancient universities about how and what to teach. To do this, I give brief summaries of what the universities say about themselves. Then I look at two or more examples of their products. There is a rich variety of people from all sorts of backgrounds and results from philosophy to jazz. I refer to 19 graduates or teachers. I have nothing new to add to their biographies, so I chose other reputable scholars to flesh out these examples. I could have started from zero but am grateful for all the wonderful scholarship that has previously taken place that I can use for my articles. To do this I freely cite, with sources, others’ scholarship. I could not even begin to do original research on individuals at my age and am grateful to the internet and libraries for the biographies and analysis.

Resentment of universities today. We have many examples of educational resentments in America today. It is understandable. My father was born in Blacksville, West Virginia, where schooling stopped at 14 years old, and boys went into the mines – the only jobs open to them. Dad got “up and out” by playing professional baseball and earned a scholarship to Slippery Rock University in western Pennsylvania. He was a “Book of the Month Club” member for the rest of his life.

But that is rare. Most poor boys and girls are stuck in the low-paying job market, and it is hard to rise out of the ghettos or poor, polluted areas of the industrial cities. They see college grads with gated communities and fancy cars, and the natural resentment is there. When I went back to my urban high school for a visit during my freshman college year (I loved that school and was president of the Student Council), I overheard “look at that jerk college joe.” I didn’t understand it at the time. We can address this issue with more free community colleges for those who want to go. And the major universities have great scholarship programs for the poor. Alas, so many of those grads go “up and out” and rarely return to their hometowns. Such is human nature and – perhaps – an unwillingness of colleges to address this issue. Students these days resent any infringement on their personal thoughts or philosophies.

Loss of academic freedom. We are faced with unprecedented moves toward state control of education that is unique in American history, though not to the closed societies of Russia and China, etc. In the past, we gave freedom to our professors to teach and research what they felt called to do. Most of them still want to help their country and its citizens in fairer and more equitable ways. That is now being challenged:

The governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, and his allies in the state legislature

and Republican politicians across America [are fostering] a blunt force counter-agenda that uses the coercive power of government to impose its own speech code and ideology on education, including higher education, as well as on private businesses.

In this, DeSantis and his emulators are demonstrating that the hard right is willing not only to jettison the conservative principle of restrained government, but to endanger the accreditation of a state system of higher education — a crucial pillar of economic growth — in order to promulgate their own repressive version of permissible language in America’s universities and colleges, which have traditionally been bastions of academic freedom.[2]

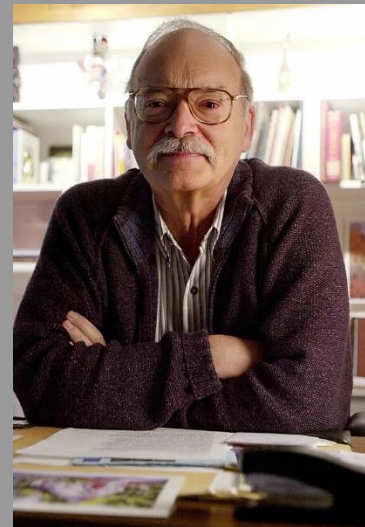
This is going to be a decisive factor in the immediate future of America and its education. The ancient universities have a lot to say about this then and now.

[1] Paul Krugman, *The Decline of E-Empires*, Aug. 25, 2013, NY Times

[2] Thomas B Edsall, ‘*Propaganda Factories and Intellectual Wastelands’ Are Not What They Had in Mind*’, March 8, 2023, NY Times

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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